LOOP DE LOOP

Photos by BRIAN BASHAM/The Citizen

Riders get on the Duval Loop bus Thursday afternoon after the ribbon-cutting event officially opening the free bus route.

City providing free bus service to ease congestion

BY SCOTT UNGER
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Crammed with city leaders, Key West's new Duval Loop bus made a ceremonial first trip around Old Town Thursday to mark the beginning of service for the free route designed to ease congestion around Duval Street.

City Commissioners and staff held a brief ribbon-cutting ceremony before boarding the blue and pink city bus, which features 16 stops around the perimeter of the island's core commercial district.

The L-shaped route runs primarily on Simonton and Whitehead streets from United Street to Caroline Street. The loop also runs up Fleming and Caroline streets and completes a

Roger McVeigh, of Key West, secures his bike to the front of the Duval Loop bus at the #1 stop Thursday on the route at the intersection of Caroline and Grinnell streets.

Loop

round trip every 15 minutes on average, according to Sustainability Coordinator Allison Higgins.

The bus won't stop unless patrons are waiting at a stop or a passenger indicates they want to exit the bus, which helps the route maintain a reliable schedule, Higgins said.

The service was able to maintain 15 minute loops during high season trial runs in March, she said.

Commissioner Sam Kaufman used the debut for a car-free day, taking an Uber to the ceremony and exiting the bus at the court house.

"It's awesome. You can get anywhere you want very easily in close proximity by using the Loop; that's fantastic," Kaufman said.

Higgins, Parking Director John Wilkins and Bike and Pedestrian Coordinator Chris Hamilton were all aboard the inaugural ride after steering the project to fruition.

Wilkins came forward with the idea to raise parking rates to fund the Duval Loop after finding that 85 percent of parking revenues in Old Town are generated by tourists, Higgins said.

The new route will ease the walking distance for elderly visiting on day-trip

BRIAN BASHAM/The Citizen

Key West mayor Craig Cates takes a ride on the Duval Loop bus prior to Thursday afternoon's ribbon-cutting event officially opening the free bus route. The free bus started running a loop around Duval Street from Simonton and Whitehead streets to United and Caroline streets Thursday morning.

bus tours, as well as those arriving from the ferry and cruise ships, Wilkins said.

Hamilton enlisted the help of the Florida Department of Transportation's South Florida Commuter Services for the Car Free Key West marketing campaign. SFCS funded the brightly colored bus wraps as well as the maps and brochures, he said.

Higgins went door to door among Old Town hotels and shops and received positive feedback from business owners about the route.

"In 99 percent of hotels and shops people were excited and couldn't wait for it to start," she said.

So far 48 hotels have agreed to partner with the Car Free Key West campaign and promote alternative transportation options like the Loop, Hamilton said.

Former planning director Thaddeus Cohen, who originally spearheaded the Loop, was also on hand to celebrate the rollout.

"It's an exciting opportunity to see something that I tried to start when I first got here two years ago," said Cohen, who is now Collier County Growth Management Department Director. "To be here for the launch is pretty cool."

Commissioner Clayton Lopez said the bus will assist

many Bahama Village residents who don't have cars.

"I think it's going to be a tremendous help," he said. "This just takes that problem away for them."

The Loop operates with two buses from 10 a.m. to midnight and one bus completing 30 minute loops from 6 to 10 a.m. daily. The route will operate seven days a week from December through April and Thursday through Sunday from May to November.

Stops are indicated by Duval Loop markers atop posts and riders can track the buses by visiting www. kwtransit.com.

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